

A Glimmer of Hope

By Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

Alex Winger squatted behind a maze of boulders overlooking the roadway that led up to the mining center complex. These jobs didn't make her nervous normally, but something gnawed at the back of her mind. Something just didn't feel right tonight. The number of Imperial personnel in Ariana had nearly tripled in the last few weeks. And all their energies seemed to be focused on the mines of Garos IV. Something deep inside her told Alex that whatever the Imperials were doing with these ore shipments was going to have a profound effect on her life.

"Look, Doro, they're loading a second cargo skiff," she said, peering through the macrobinoculars. Last night, they'd observed one sled being transported from the mines to the spaceport outside Ariana. Tonight, it looked like the Imperials were doubling their load. But these two skiffs would never make it to the spaceport.

"What in the worlds are they doing with all that ore?" her companion wondered. Doro was 28 years old and this was only his second mission in the field. Alex had been involved with the underground for two years, but her experiences made her feel a lot older than her 18 years.

"I count a dozen scout troopers on speeder bikes," she told Doro. "Plus the two man crew on each sled." Alex pulled her comlink off her belt and sent a signal to her comrades who were waiting in ambush about a kilometer to the north. "C'mon, let's move out," she said.

Suddenly, blaster fire punctuated the stillness of the forest. "What's going on," Doro whispered.

"Team Two, come in," Alex called into her comlink as she headed for the wooded hillside.

"They found us," the voice on the other end of the comlink calmly reported over the static. "AT-STs! And some --"

There was more blaster fire, then the comlink went dead.

"C'mon, Doro, move it," Alex yelled to her companion as another round of blaster fire rang out through the woods. They were definitely getting closer.

Alex and Doro turned westward toward the Tahika Cliffs. The terrain here was too rugged for the AT-STs. Even the Imperial speeder bikes would have a difficult time traversing the area, especially during the middle of the night.

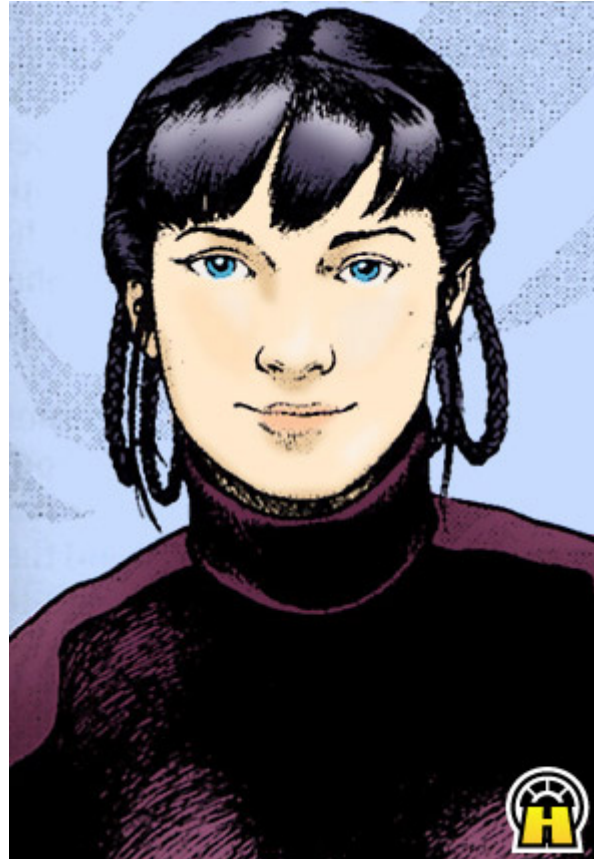
Several shots whipped past Alex's head, igniting a nearby tree. Then she noticed she didn't hear Doro's footsteps behind her. Alex slowed her pace for a few seconds and looked to see his prone body 10 meters back. She could hear the speeder bikes moving closer.

Alex took a deep breath, turned around, and reached Doro in 10 seconds. He'd been hit in the shoulder by a blaster and had fallen, cracking his skull on a rock. Alex could find no pulse. Another shot rang out to Alex's left. She touched Doro's forehead to wish him well wherever death had taken him, then headed farther up the hillside.

Alex could hear footsteps coming up behind her and searchlights lit the side of the mountain. She felt confident that she could outwit these scout troopers. She was much more familiar with the terrain than they.

But at the top of the crest, Alex took a misstep, and tripped over some fallen branches. She went careening down the hill. Every rock and every fallen tree branch seemed to find a mark on her body. She came to a stop, bruised and aching, a bright light shining in her eyes. She squinted and could just make out the uniform of a scout trooper.

"Get up!" he yelled at her. "Slowly, now!"



Alex had no problem following that order. Ever so slowly she rose, first to her knees, her hand shielding her eyes from the bright light.

"Over here!" the scout trooper called to his comrade who was hidden from view by the dense underbrush. His light pointed away from Alex for no more than a second. That second was all she needed to grab a fallen limb and send it crashing into the trooper with every bit of strength that she could muster. Alex grabbed the trooper's blaster as he tumbled to the ground and she sprinted the three meters to his speeder bike. Another blast shot past Alex's head and she returned fire as the scout trooper's companion came into view. Two shots from her blaster and the man had crumpled to the forest floor.

Alex jumped on the speeder bike and took off toward the Cliffs. The going was slow, the darkness hampering her vision, but she decided to stick with the speeder bike to put as much distance as possible between the pursuing scout troopers and herself. She finally deserted the bike about one kilometer south of the landspeeder she and Doro had come in.

It was right where they'd left it, fairly close to the cliffs that overlooked the most gorgeous, yet deadly, view anywhere on the planet. The Tahika Cliffs -- for over one hundred kilometers they stretched the coastline, steep and forbidding. From this point they dropped vertically almost 200 meters. Few had attempted to climb them. Of those, fewer than half had survived. Alex had never attempted the climb, but in her dreams she saw herself scaling the sides of the Cliffs. It was a most unusual dream. She was always in the company of a man with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. He was there every time. He seemed familiar to her, yet she'd never met anyone like him. So she waited for the day he would come into her life.

It was quiet now except for the call of the crupas that dwelt in the trees. Alex heard no speeder bikes, no footsteps on the forest floor. She revved up the landspeeder and turned north, heading back toward Ariana.

She avoided the main roads and followed the paths that hugged the Cliffs -- no need to risk running into the heightened patrols in the area.

Thoughts of Team Two came to her mind -- she wondered if they'd been killed, or captured. She wasn't worried that they'd identify her. No one knew her real name. That's how the underground cells were set up. Mostly nameless faces, usually four to six people in each cell. If one were captured, they'd never be able to betray more than a handful of people.

Normally they worked efficiently. Tonight was the first time in months something had gone wrong. Alex wondered if the Imperials had been tipped off somehow. Or if the increased activities at the mines, which meant increased patrols, had just caused their bad luck this evening. She'd have to discuss it with her cell leader in the morning.

For now, she made her way up to the governor's mansion and parked the landspeeder. Fortunately, her stepfather hadn't felt the need to have security guards patrol the grounds around their home. So Alex was able to slip in through the back door unnoticed. The house was quiet. She tiptoed upstairs past the darkened wing where Tork Winger slept. Safely behind the doors of her own room, she stared at herself in the mirror, shaking her head. "What a mess you are, Alex!" she told the reflection. Her face was smeared with dirt, her clothes were ripped and filthy from her tumble down the mountain. She'd have to get rid of them tomorrow. She chuckled to herself, glancing at her chrono. Not tomorrow, she thought, today, as she cleaned the grime from her face.

Five minutes later, Alex fell into her comfortable bed, exhausted. Within minutes, she slept but her sleep was restless. A disturbing dream intruded into her thoughts -- *Explosions ripped through a building -- everything was so hazy -- it looked like a barracks. A man lay wounded in the corridor, stunned by a blast -- a woman bent over him, cradling his head in her arms...*

Alex awoke with a start, as light streamed in through the window. *Who are these people?* Something seemed vaguely familiar about the man, but she couldn't really place his face. And who was that woman?

She nearly jumped out of bed when her servant droid entered the room. "Good morning Mistress Alexandra," he chirped cheerily. "Your father would like you to join him for breakfast in the solarium in one-half hour."

She groaned as she sat up in bed. "Is it time to get up already?"

"Yes, indeed, Mistress. You don't want to keep the Governor waiting."

Alex rolled her eyes, and glanced at the chrono. 0700. Time to get up. It was going to be a busy day.

"Good morning, Father," she greeted Tork Winger with a kiss on the cheek.

"Alexandra," he said, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. "Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

Alex rubbed her eyes, trying to wake up, and took a sip of tea. "Big exam today, Father. Chemistry. I was up until after one studying."

He shook his head. "Six hours' sleep? That's not too bad. But I imagine you dreamed of formulas all night long. That would be enough to keep me from a restful sleep."

Alex nodded in agreement.

They ate breakfast in silence. *Typical*, Alex thought, smiling to herself. Her stepfather always wanted to dine with her, but he saved most of the conversation for the end of the meal. Winger reviewed his schedule for the day, and read the morning updates. Alex could tell he was disturbed by something -- it had to be a report of the underground's unsuccessful activity. He finally spoke just as Alex took the last bite of her meal.

"Alexandra, I'd like you to help me host dinner this evening."

"Special company tonight, Father?" she asked. "The Imperial Star Destroyer *Judicator* is making orbit this afternoon," Winger told her. "You remember my old friend Captain Brandei, don't you?"

Alex felt her heart skip several beats. *An Imperial Star Destroyer at Garos*. "Yes, of course. He was here about three years ago, wasn't it right after the Battle of Endor?"

Winger grimaced. "Alexandra, please do not bring that subject up tonight." He hadn't said it to admonish his daughter, but only to remind her that any mention of that disaster should not be discussed in the presence of any Imperial officers.

"Of course not, Father," she said. "Dinner, this evening? What time?"

"Seven," he said, smiling at her. "Your mother would be so proud of you, Alexandra. You really should consider a career in the diplomatic corps. You carry yourself so well at functions like these. And you are such a brilliant young woman!"

"I know, Father! You've told me this a thousand times! But I hate politics!"

Winger chuckled, taking one last sip of his tea. "All right, my dear, I won't try to talk you into it over breakfast." He got up and turned to leave the room, giving her one last peck on the cheek. "I'll see you this evening, Alexandra."

"Yes, sir." He was almost out the door of the solarium when he called back to her. "Oh, and good luck on that chemistry exam." She smiled at him. He really had been good to her all these years. Alexandra did love him, but wished there was some way she could convince him that the Empire's method of controlling the Garosian conflict was not the solution to the problem.

Tork Winger didn't necessarily agree with the Empire's use of force, but at least the random bombings, assassinations, and outright fighting between towns controlled by the different factions seemed to have ended. Of course, the populace soon found itself with a common enemy -- the Imperials. The more conservative elements of both groups united to form the underground. This small group of freedom fighters tried to make life miserable for those unfortunate people the Emperor had sent to their world. Little did Tork Winger know that a member of his own family was a part of that underground organization.

Alex tried to stifle a yawn, but this latest lecture at the university on Imperial military structure had to be the dullest offering of the term. Unfortunately, it was required for all students since the Empire had established a presence on Garos.

And Alex, unlike many of her classmates, had the potential, but not the desire, of going on to the Raithal Academy. Being a woman could have put a damper on that idea, but Alexandra Winger was the daughter of an Imperial governor. And she was a brilliant student. Had the times been different, she certainly would have been at the Academy by now.

But that was the crux of the matter. The Emperor was dead, and the Imperial fleet was in a state of disorganized confusion. Admirals, governors, and fleet captains all jockeyed for position trying to bring order out of the chaos. The thing was, there didn't seem to be much order.

Now there were even rumors that the New Republic was advancing deeper and deeper in the Core Worlds toward Coruscant. Some said that nearly half the galaxy was in their hands. Garos IV wasn't that far off the beaten track -- a mere four days from Coruscant. Alex prayed for the day when the New Republic made its appearance on Garos. It was a day all who worked for the underground looked forward to.



The commander's voice droned steadily on. Alex had to rub her eyes just to stay awake. Just a few more minutes, she thought, glancing at her chrono. When she looked up, she caught Lej Carner giving her a sly look. She'd met him a year earlier when his father, a major general in the Imperial army, had been assigned to run the mining center complex. And she'd had the misfortune of having him in at least one class for each of the last three terms.

Agh! She tried to smile. She found Lej disgusting -- one of the most arrogant men she had ever met. But she'd cultivated his friendship to uncover as much as she could about the increased Imperial activities at the mines. Unfortunately, Lej had little knowledge, by choice as far as Alex could discern, of his father's command.

The buzzer sounded indicating the end of class. Alex stood up, trying to collect her things when Trad Mays slammed into her.

"Sorry, Alexandra," he said. "Here, let me help you with those." He bent down to pick up her data books that had crashed to the floor, and Alex could have sworn he was blushing.

She smiled at him, overlooking his clumsiness, and let him pick up her things as Lej walked up to her.

"Alexandra, there's a group of us meeting at Chado's in a half hour. Can you come?" he asked. She feigned disappointment. "Sorry, Lej, I've got some work to do."

"Aw, come on Alexandra. You know what they say -- all work and no play ..."

"Lej, this is something my father asked me to do. I can't put it off," she tried to explain.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah, the great governor himself! You know, Alexandra, you don't work for him!"

Trad handed a stack of books to Alex and grinned sheepishly at her. "See you tomorrow," he called as he left her alone with Lej.

"I'm just trying to be helpful, Lej. Since my mother died last year I've picked up some of her unofficial duties."

"Oh, I see your plan! Trying to get extra points so they'll have to admit you to the Academy. Too bad you can't go this year with me!"

"Yeah," she hid the relief in her voice, "too bad."

"Well, guess I'll see you later."

Alex hurried from the MillnDoc building toward the University Library. She stopped at one of the central comm terminals to check for messages, punching in her ID. Within seconds, the message she anticipated appeared.

Study group meeting in L-25 at 1015.

She glanced at her chrono. Five minutes. She signed off the terminal and headed for her "study group."

They were already waiting for her deep in the bowels of the library, through a maze of corridors to the secret entrance into an underground system of tunnels. It was said you could travel the entire length of Ariana underground, if you knew your way around.

The men sat at the conference table in the small room. Dr. Carl Barzon and Magir Paca were two leaders of the resistance movement on Garos IV. These men were part of the handful of people whom Alex knew the identities of. Barzon had been Alex's first contact with the underground. And Paca was an old family friend, at least until his traitorous activities had been uncovered. "What happened?" Paca asked Alex.

"There were extra guards at the mines. And they must have been set up on the perimeter before we even got there. I never spotted anyone until the shooting began," she told them. "Any word on Team Two?"

"Scat was captured. He is being held in the detention center. And because of the incident last night, the skiffs are under heavy guard at the mining center."

She nodded. "What's going on at the mines? Have they discovered something we don't know about?"

"We were hoping you might be able to find out more about that," Dr. Barzon said. "They've confiscated all my research notes. I don't dare add any new data to what they already have."

"Your research on the ore?" Alex asked.

"Yes. We made a breakthrough -- isolated the component in the ore that creates the natural cloaking abilities. I'm getting close to refining a technique which will allow us to manufacture cloaked weapons at a fraction of the cost it now requires to build cloaking devices, and with none of the energy requirements the current devices use. You can imagine the consequences for the galaxy if such knowledge fell into the wrong hands."

Alex didn't even have to imagine. It was all quite clear that this new technology could put the Empire back on the offensive.

"I wonder if your research has anything to do with the Star Destroyer *Judicator's* visit to Garos," Alex said.

"The *Judicator* is here?" Barzon asked.

"Yes. I'm helping my father host a dinner tonight for her senior officers. Maybe I'll be able to find out something useful."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Barzon said. "Just be careful."

"What about Scat?" Alex asked. They'd broken other people out of detention before, but there were a lot fewer Imperial stormtroopers to deal with during those missions.

"Team Five is going in at 0400."

"I'd like to help," she offered.

"It's too risky, Alex."

"Risky's my middle name!"

"With the increased Imperial activity, I just don't..."

"Paca, I know what I'm doing," she insisted.

"All right. Rendezvous with Team Five at 0300 in tunnel C-21," Paca said.

She nodded. "You said the supply skiffs are still at the mine?"

"Yes. Our contact at the Defense Ministry said they're moving out at 1230 today. They are supposed to arrive at the spaceport at 1300."

"So they *are* taking the ore off-planet."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"We don't know yet. Our contact is working on that. Maybe you'll hear something tonight."

"That must be why the *Judicator* is here," Alex commented. "So, what time do we hit the spaceport?"

"We can't hit them there, Alexandra."

"Don't we have anyone who can get to the shuttle that's taking the ore? Sabotage it?"

"Security's really tight -- we've had a difficult time infiltrating the spaceport. But we're working on that," Paca said. "For now, we have to hit the convoy on the road, before it gets to the spaceport."

"In broad daylight?" Barzon asked.

"We have no choice," Paca replied. "Are you in?"

Alex nodded, a grim determination in her face. "Okay. Here's the plan..."

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Alex's landspeeder zipped along the winding mountainous road south of the spaceport. She had such natural instincts for piloting, she could almost fly blindfolded.

No signs of increased activity through here, she thought. It surprised her that the Imperials didn't seem overly concerned about their ore shipment, even after that incident last night. *Well, hopefully that will make our job a little easier.*

Alex turned the landspeeder off the main road and stopped about a kilometer to the west. There were a series of caves here she'd discovered as a child perfect for hiding landspeeders, or any weapons the underground might find useful. She pulled her landspeeder into a cave, the running lights illuminating the darkness, and moved about 50 meters from the entrance before stopping.

The cave was deserted; her comrades had taken the stolen Plex missile launcher from its hiding place. They would be set up about two kilometers to the southeast lying in wait for that supply convoy. Alex pulled on some camouflage clothing then grabbed her blaster rifle and macrobinoculars from the hidden compartment in the landspeeder. She took off at a trot to get in position for the coming attack.

Alex carefully made her way through the densely wooded terrain, over one rise, down the other side and back up another. She watched her back -- she didn't want a repeat of last night -- but she saw no sign of scout troopers in the forest.

From her position at the summit of Hargon's Hill, Alex had a clear view of a small portion of the road about 150 meters away. She knew that all around her in the hills 30 members of the underground lay in waiting, each with a slightly different angle on the road. Each person was assigned a specific target. They'd be lucky to get off more than two shots, so each shot had to count.

Alex checked the sight on her blaster rifle aiming for a spot on the road where she expected two scout troopers to appear. She glanced at her chrono. *Won't be long now*, she thought.

The forest muted the sounds of the two advance scouts, but Alex spotted them as they followed the winding road toward the spaceport. *Right on time.* She took a deep breath, trying to relax and get into a comfortable position. Another tense minute passed. Then, through the gunsight, she watched two, then four more scout troopers, appear on the road. The first skiff was behind that group. Suddenly, an explosion shook the mountainside as the Plex missile found its first mark. Alex immediately fired her first round, hitting the third scout trooper. Another shot and she'd taken out the one next to him as well. Another explosion lit the forest, as the second skiff exploded into flames. Alex peered through her macros and from her vantage point, she could see four dead scout troopers. A fifth one seemed to be wounded, crawling away from his wrecked speeder. Parts of the skiff had been blown for meters in every direction, probably killing a few other troopers.

But for now, Alex's job was done. She slung the blaster rifle over her shoulder and headed down the mountainside back toward the northwest where her speeder was hidden. She was almost within sight of the caves when someone stepped out from behind a tree and tackled her, throwing her to the ground. She tried to pull away from him, but he was much stronger. She was flat on her stomach on the ground when he pulled her headgear off and turned her over.

"Holy empire!" he said. It was Lej Carrier. What in the worlds was he doing out here? *He must have followed me, probably wondered why I went past the turn for the Governor's mansion.* She wondered if he knew about the caves. *Alex*, she thought to herself, *you've got to be more cautious!*

"Get off of me!" she yelled at him, hoping to throw him off balance.

"Alexandra," he said, moving off her, but pulling a blaster from his belt, "those are awfully strange garments you're wearing." He paused, then pointed at her blaster. "Nice rifle. Standard underground issue?"

Alex sat up glaring at him. If only she could remain calm for a few minutes, surely some of her comrades would show up. She had to stall him. She started to get up.

"Watch it," he said. "Move away from the rifle. Slowly. Gee, Alexandra, bet you didn't hear those two explosions, did you?" His tone was dripping with sarcasm, but Alex held his stare. She moved a step closer to him. "Lej, I..."

"Don't bother, Alexandra. I don't want anything to do with traitors."

From the corner of her eye, Alex spotted a movement off to her left in the trees. She looked off toward the right, and Lej's eyes followed hers. Obviously, this wasn't his line of work. He'd forgotten she probably had companions. He looked around nervously, then moved closer and pushed Alex toward his landspeeder.

Alex stumbled to the ground, and heard one shot ring out. She looked behind her as Lej crumpled to the rocky floor, dying instantly from the blaster shot.

A man she knew as Chance appeared from behind a tree. "You okay?" he asked her.

She nodded, but felt more shaken up than she cared to admit. "Thanks," she said, not wanting to look at her classmate's body, but forcing herself to do it.

Chance placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's all right," he told her.

Alex took a deep breath. "Yeah. I'll move the landspeeder into the cave," she told him.

"I'll get rid of the body," Chance said. He lifted the lifeless form over his shoulders and headed toward the Cliffs.

After Alex moved Lej's landspeeder deep into the caves, she changed her clothes, returned the blaster rifle and macrobinoculars to their hidden compartment, and moved her landspeeder out of the cave.

She knew the main road would be crawling with Imperial troops soon, but the back road to the governor's mansion was deserted. It was only a kilometer to the main drive near the mansion. Everything seemed perfectly normal as she pulled the landspeeder under the front portico of the mansion. She parked, grabbed her books and headed into the house. She glanced at her chrono. It was 1310.

* * *

The ancient timepiece in the front hall chimed midnight as Alex and Tork Winger bid good night to their guests. It had been a fascinating evening. Not surprisingly, the main topic of conversation had been the attack on the supply convoy.

Alexandra doted on Captain Brandei, hoping to learn where the Empire was shipping the ore. She was careful not to ask too many questions, but found that everyone else at the dinner party asked almost everything she needed to know. Unfortunately, the captain was tight-lipped about the location of the manufacturing facility. But he did explain to a group of diplomats that the late Emperor had seen this vision of Garos' contribution to the war effort, and had left specific instructions concerning the ore.

Amazing, Alex thought, the Emperor had had visions of the future. She'd grown up hearing stories about the Emperor and his mystical powers -- the powers of the Force. And his destruction at the hands of the young Jedi named Luke Skywalker was a story that no one would ever dare to forget.

Alex had tried to learn more about the Jedi Knights, especially this power to see the future. Many of her own dreams -- she never really called them visions -- had come true. But she could never imagine herself with the other powers ascribed to those few people known as Jedi. Yet, somehow, it all seemed so familiar to her.



I hope the Jedi come to Garos. Come to help my people, she thought as she mindlessly waved good night to a group of commanders boarding a landspeeder back to the spaceport.

Far off in her mind, she saw another group of people -- *They were saying goodbye -- they were in the landing bay of a starship. And she saw herself there, sitting in the cockpit of an X-wing starfighter! An X-wing? How in the worlds? Another pilot was standing on the ladder of her ship. It was the man from her dream -- the man on the Cliffs! He touched her hand and she was sure he called her name...*

"Alexandra?"

The voice seemed distant. It took a moment for Alex to realize that her stepfather had taken her hand. She smiled at him.

"I think I'll go to bed, Father." She yawned. "I'm really tired."

"It's been a long day, Alexandra. Thank you for being such a charming hostess." He kissed her on the cheek. "Captain Brandei was extremely impressed with you this evening," he said as they walked back into the foyer arm in arm. "I believe he's going to give you a recommendation to the Academy."

"Oh, Father, do you really think so?" *Just what I always wanted,* she thought sarcastically.

"Yes. I'll be sure you get it before the *Judicator* departs," Winger added.

"When is that?"

"A day or two. The captain said they'll try again tomorrow to move another shipment of ore to the spaceport."

"I imagine security will be much tighter. I still can't believe the underground attacked that convoy only three kilometers from here!"

"Yes," he said, a touch of concern in his voice. "You know, Alexandra, perhaps you should make arrangements to stay at the university until this business is concluded. It worries me to think of you travelling alone from the city. I may even have to think about requesting guards for the governor's mansion."

"Oh, Father, please. I hate to think of us living in an armed camp," Alex said, wondering about the difficulties of sneaking in and out of a mansion guarded day and night by stormtroopers.

"These are difficult times, Alexandra. I don't want you to come to any harm."

"All right, Father. Let's not discuss this now. I'm way too tired," she said, stifling another yawn. "Will I see you at breakfast?"

"Yes, of course, my dear. Good night, Alexandra."

"Good night, Father."

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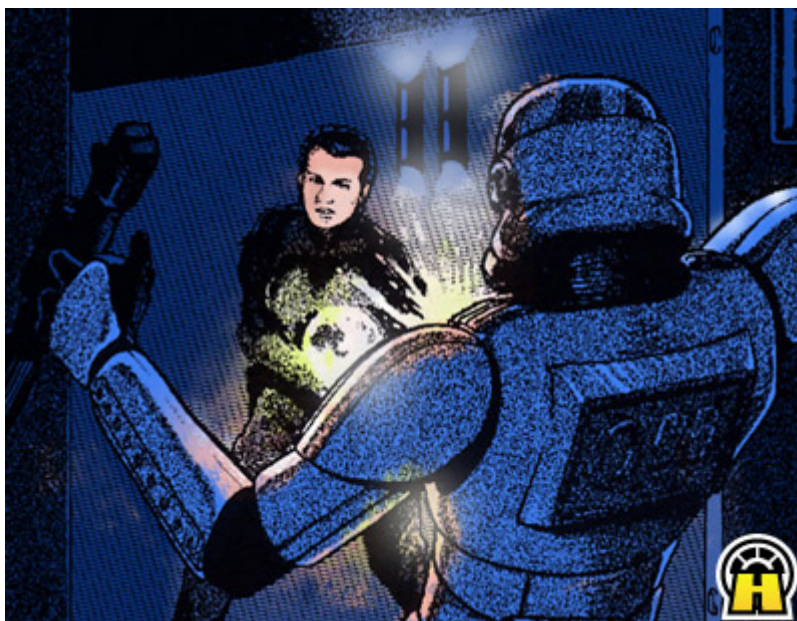
Three people silently entered the building through a maintenance room deep within Imperial Headquarters. The secret entrance had been there long before the Imperials' arrival on Garos IV, but only a few members of the underground even knew of its existence.

Alex checked her blaster one last time. Set for stun. The two men with her checked their own weapons, standard stormtrooper issue blaster rifles which had been confiscated during an earlier raid. "Ready?"

The one man nodded and was about to tap the panel to open the door when Alex felt a tingling sensation crawl up her spine.

"Wait..." she whispered to her companions. No one dared to breathe. At first they heard nothing. Then the distinctive echo of footsteps sounded through the corridor outside the door. At the end of the hallway, the footsteps stopped, a door slid open, then closed. The corridor was quiet.

The freedom fighters moved silently through the corridor toward the turbolift. Their objective was the detention block one level up, where their comrade Scat was being held prisoner. Two guards would be on duty at this time of night. They expected to move in quickly and surprise the Imperials before they had a chance to call for help. Then they would locate Scat and get out of the cell block. The whole operation shouldn't take much more than a minute.



Of course, things didn't always go as planned --muted voices from that last room near the turbolift caused Alex to pause. She held up her hand, signalling the other two men to stop. She pointed at the door.

"How many?" one of her companions mouthed. Alex held up two, then three fingers, shrugging her shoulders. They nodded, moving toward the turbolift, but cautious of this threat at their backs. Alex pressed the panel for the turbolift and realized it was already headed toward this lowest level of the headquarters.

"Someone's coming," she whispered.

Pressed against either side of the turbolift doors the three freedom fighters waited. The door slid open and a young man was shoved into the corridor. From the corner of his eye he saw the three masked figures clad

in black. Instinctively he fell to the ground.

Across from them, another door slid open and the lieutenant who was supposed to be interrogating a prisoner this evening found himself facing the members of the resistance. Alex moved out into the open and fired at the stormtrooper in the turbolift who had been guarding Scat. Her friends blasted the lieutenant, who never even had time to reach for his weapon. They rushed into the room where they'd heard voices a few moments earlier. The blaster fire had alerted the other Imperial officers inside. One was caught, his own blaster half-drawn, and the other had clicked on his comlink to call for help.

Within seconds it was over, both Imperials stunned by their enemies' blaster rifles. An alarm sounded as the four freedom fighters headed down the corridor back toward the maintenance room.

By the time security arrived, Alex and her companions were nowhere to be seen. In the maintenance room, Alex felt for the indentation on the back of one section of shelves and pressed it, revealing the entrance to the secret passage where they'd come in.

Ten seconds later the group moved back through the tunnel and to safety.

Mission accomplished.